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**SHORT COMMUNICATION**

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# Report on a Continuing Professional Education Needs Assessment among Library Personnel in The Bahamas

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## ABSTRACT

The College of The Bahamas Libraries and Instructional Media Services department is the premier academic and research library in the country. Its mission is to meet the needs and expectations of its patrons by acquiring and maintaining extensive physical and digital repositories of resources to support teaching and research. During a library symposium held in 2016 the planning committee surveyed attendees to gather information about their educational background and needs and goals for continuing professional education. The article summarizes the findings and potential implications of the survey.

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## INTRODUCTION

Libraries play an important role in the national development of a country. Library personnel are gatekeepers of information that is acquired and stored in library databases in addition to collections of printed materials of all kinds. They play a central role in acquisition and maintenance of resources. They are also keys to ensuring that library patrons are aware of all the resources at their disposal and how to effectively access and utilize these resources. While the inherent role of the library staff remains unchanged, the nature of how they facilitate effective maintenance and use of library resources is constantly evolving in the face of changing trends in technology and education. In addition, library staff may need to engage and assist non-traditional users, such as distance learners, non-native speakers, as well as

students with intellectual disabilities, in a way that ensures their access to and successful use of library resources (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2006).

Virkus & Metsar (2004) took an in-depth look at the trends and developments in higher education and the corresponding changes that institutions and libraries undertook in order to address the dynamic higher-education landscape. The authors noted a student-centered paradigm shift and an internationalization in higher education that not only required a change in pedagogy and learning approaches in the classroom, but also a reorganization of the role and responsibilities of institutional libraries and the ways in which libraries met the needs of their patrons (Virkus & Metsar, 2004). User education and information literacy efforts have moved beyond just providing traditional

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assistance in locating resources to users who come to the library. Nowadays it is more common for library staff to hold class presentations, develop user guides and independent training courses, both online, web-based and in-person, face-to-face. Library personnel also spend more time helping patrons select and organize their literature reviews or educating students about how to use appropriate literature and research strategies to locate relevant sources (Virkus & Metsar, 2004).

In order to effectively fulfil their dynamic roles of promoting and facilitating the educational process, library staff themselves also need to be educated. As key professionals, today's librarians and auxiliary staff must be willing to undergo continual training in order to remain current with trends and new technology in education. The specifics of how to accomplish this and what type of training library staff might need is an ongoing topic of debate.

Marcum (2015) details the outcomes of a three-day conference held at Simmons College's School of Library and Information Science in January 2015. The goal of the conference was to gain insight from a cross-section of higher education personnel, including library staff, and experts in the technology and education sectors. It was seen as a crucial opportunity to get a greater consensus on the future educational needs of library professionals and to determine what specific training library personnel might undertake in order to be effective in their jobs. Marcum noted some of the challenges of achieving this goal, including the fact that there is a lack of consensus about what defines library science as a profession. Consequently, developing a unified framework of what constitutes appropriate library and information science training is challenging. However, what is not in dispute is the fact that the librarian profession needs

to better adapt to the changing academic landscape. In the United States library personnel are being encouraged to seek ongoing career development. Many universities require applicants seeking employment as librarians to have at least a Master's degree in Library Science. They are also more inclined to hire auxiliary staff who have knowledge in a specific discipline that may be useful for different academic departments in the university, such as a GIS technology or legal expertise (Marcum, 2015). Therefore, it is imperative that individuals who hold or seek to enter careers in library science embrace the idea of ongoing professional development.

The College of The Bahamas (COB) Libraries and Instructional Media Services Department (LIMS) is the leading research library in the country. It comprises three physical locations that serve College faculty, staff and students throughout The Bahamas. The Harry C. Moore Library and Information Centre is the main branch of the COB LIMS system. It is located on the Oakes Field Campus in Nassau. In addition, a health sciences library, the Hilda Bowen Library is located at the Grosvenor Close Campus (off Shirley Street, in downtown Nassau), and the Northern Campus Library at the Northern Bahamas Campus in East Grand Bahama on Grand Bahama Island.

The overarching vision and mission of COB LIMS is to continually augment and preserve physical and digital repositories of resources to support teaching and research and to develop services and programmes conducive for professional growth (The College of The Bahamas, 2016). To support this strategy, the Library held a two-day symposium in February 2016 to bring together staff from the three physical branches of the COB LIMS but also to engage personnel working in libraries in Nassau and Family Islands (specifically Eleuthera, Long Island and Cat Island). During this symposium the COB Library

Symposium Planning Committee conducted a survey to gather information about educational background and goals for continuing education of Bahamian library personnel. Symposium attendees represented a diverse cross-section of academic, public, school and special libraries in The Bahamas. They included professional librarians (i.e. persons with at least a Master's degree in Library Science) and para-professional or auxiliary library staff (i.e. persons without at least a Master's degree in Library Science). Like the Simmons College conference described by Marcum (2015), the COB Library Symposium Planning Committee used this survey as an opportunity to better understand the educational background and educational and career development goals of those who currently work in the library field in The Bahamas.

### **Method**

The COB Library Symposium Planning Committee Survey was designed to target all librarians and para-professional or auxiliary staff attending the two-day symposium. The objectives of the survey were to determine the following about library staff in The Bahamas:

1. gender demographics;
2. current academic qualifications;
3. number of professional librarians (i.e. with at least a Master's degree in Library Science).
4. need for short training courses for library staff to enhance their current education and training.

Participants were asked to complete an electronic questionnaire during the symposium. The respondents were required to supply answers to seven questions that were used to assess the survey population demographics including: biographical data, level of education, level of interest in additional library-related education training and availability of respondents to complete

additional training if offered. A total of 32 of the approximately 64 attendees of the symposium completed the survey.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results of the survey provided key insights into the current professional landscape of librarians and auxiliary staff in The Bahamas. The first objective of the survey was to gather information about gender and age demographics of the participants. The biographical data revealed that all 32 respondents who participated in the survey were female. Traditionally, the field of library science has been female-dominated, however, a growing number of men are pursuing library science as a viable career.

While data about gender dynamics in the field of library science in Caribbean countries are extremely limited, a 2012 report from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that there has been a 48% increase in the number of males in the field of library science since 1980 (Blackburn, 2015). While this trend is expected to continue in the United States, the COB library survey appears to reveal that as of 2016 The Bahamas is seriously lagging in the successful recruitment of males into the library science profession. This could in part be because there are still negative gender stereotypes about library science even within the United States. For many, library work is seen as "women's work" and men who enter the field are sometimes ridiculed for choosing a feminine career (Blackburn, 2015).

Another revelation from the COB survey is that in general very few millennials are entering the library science profession. In response to the question about age, the survey results indicate that most of the participants (84%) were at least 40 years old and only 16% of the respondents were under the age of 40 years. This result is summarized in Figure 1.

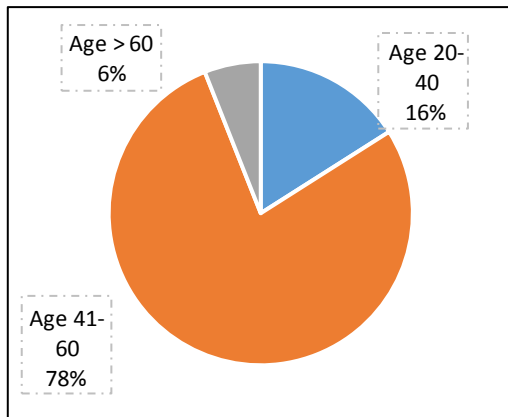


Figure 1. Age of Library Symposium Attendees

It is possible that the symposium attendees were primarily senior staff members who also happened to be predominantly older and female, while junior staff members who did not attend the symposium are younger and include males as well as females. However, if the results of this survey accurately reflect the gender and age demographic of the entire library science field in The Bahamas, these data could potentially represent an important deficit in future library personnel to fulfil the needs of future library patrons. As more of the current library staff over 40 years old reach retirement age over the next decade or two, there would potentially be too few younger individuals in the profession to fill their roles. Therefore, the College of The Bahamas and the Ministry of Education may need to be proactive in promoting library science not only to incoming freshmen at the college level, but also to high school students.

Another objective of the 2016 survey was to determine the educational background of the individuals participating in the survey. The results are summarized in Figure 2 and indicate that a significant number of the participants are college-degree holders.

A one-sample t-test between proportions of degreed versus non-degreed library personnel who participated in the study indicates that a significant number of them hold at least an Associate-level degree ( $p = .0006$ ). This

represents 78% of the respondents. In addition to already holding degrees, all of the respondents who did not hold a university or college degree indicated that they would be interested in working towards completing at least an Associate-level degree. More than 30% of the respondents currently possess a Bachelor degree and approximately 22% of the respondents were professional librarians who possess a Master's degree in Library Science (MLS).

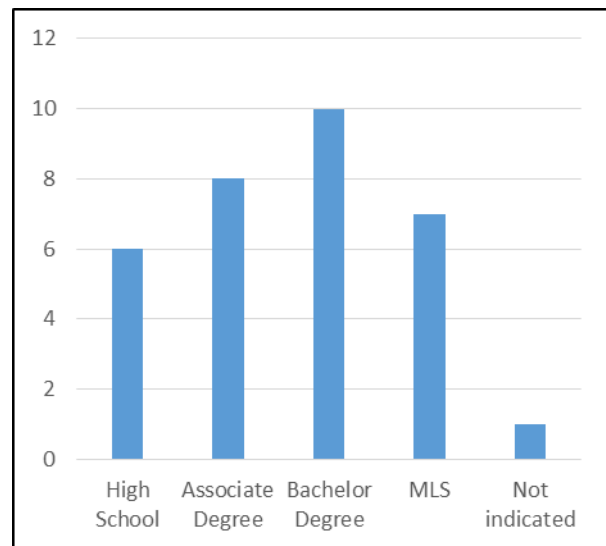


Figure 2. Education levels of Bahamian library personnel.

The final objective of the 2016 COB survey was to determine if there is a need for ongoing short-courses as an option for continued professional development. The results are summarized in Figures 3 and 4.

The results indicate that most of the survey participants appear enthusiastic about pursuing opportunities for continued professional development education. As illustrated in Figure 3, respondents indicated that they would be ready to begin additional education and training as early as the Fall 2016 or Spring 2017 semesters if the opportunities were available.

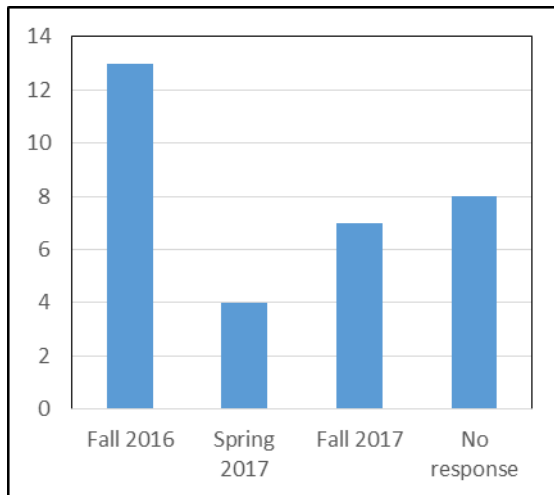


Figure 3. Proposed dates to start continuing professional development courses.

Figure 4 illustrates the format (onsite vs. online) of courses survey participants might be interested in completing as part of professional development education.

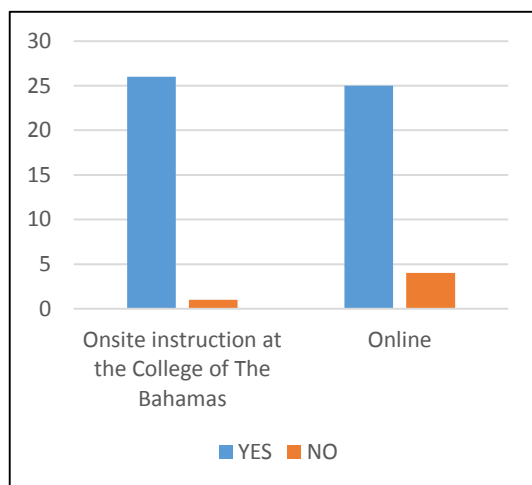


Figure 4. Interest in onsite vs online instruction

The participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in courses at COB's main campus in Nassau and an additional question asked if they would be interested in participating in online courses. Most of the respondents also indicated that they were amenable to completing additional training both onsite at the COB's main campus or online.

## Conclusion

While there may not be consensus on what

specific training individual library staff within the library science profession as a whole need, there is a general consensus that library staff should comprise well-educated, well-trained professionals who can adequately meet the needs of a dynamic patron population. Although the current survey was limited in scope, it provides key insight into several aspects of the current landscape of library science professionals in The Bahamas who attended a recent two-day symposium. The survey participants represented a diverse cross-section of professional librarians and para-professional library staff. This survey was able to capture details about their current biographical demographic, their level of education, as well as their goals and interests in further professional development.

Overall the library personnel who participated in this study are well educated, with the majority holding a Bachelor's or higher-level degree. In addition, most of the individuals who participated in this survey expressed enthusiasm in relation to some form of continuing education or professional development. The data gathered in the present study may also be extremely useful in guiding COB and the Ministry of Education to develop strategies to ensure that the number of individuals pursuing careers in library science increases to meet not only the current but future needs of library patrons. At present, only a very small percentage of the country's library personnel appear to be under the age of 40 years. This, in addition to the fact that very few, if any, males are currently pursuing a career path in library science, presents an opportunity for the College and the Ministry to carry out recruitment initiatives to rectify this deficit.

It may therefore be beneficial to conduct a larger survey of all current library professionals to not only gain a more thorough understanding of the current landscape of library science professionals in

The Bahamas, but to also find out specifically what kinds of continuing education courses and degrees they might need to pursue in

order to better meet the needs of a dynamic patron population.

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### LIBRARY EDUCATION NEEDS SURVEY February, 2016

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Employment (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ (W) \_\_\_\_\_ (H)

E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

P.O. Box: \_\_\_\_\_

Age Category: 20-40 \_\_\_\_\_ 41-60 \_\_\_\_\_ Over 60 \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Current Academic Qualifications: High School Diploma \_\_\_\_\_ Associate Degree \_\_\_\_\_ (Subject)

Bachelors Degree \_\_\_\_\_ (Subject) Masters Degree \_\_\_\_\_ (Subject)

Other (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Have you participated in any formal library training? Yes [ ☐ ] No [ ☐ ]  
If yes, state date of attendance \_\_\_\_\_
2. What level of library training, if any, do you desire?  
None \_\_\_\_\_ Certificate \_\_\_\_\_ Associate Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Diploma \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. If available, are you willing to do the training at the College of The Bahamas? Yes [ ☐ ] No [ ☐ ]
4. If yes, how soon are you willing to begin? Fall 2016 [ ☐ ] Spring 2017 [ ☐ ] Fall 2017 [ ☐ ]
5. What is your preferred mode of learning? Face to face [ ☐ ] Online [ ☐ ] blended (face-to-face and online) [ ☐ ]